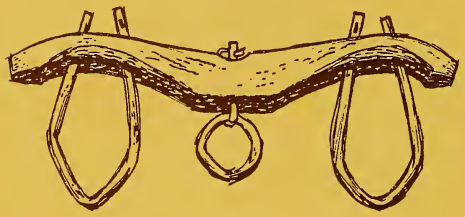
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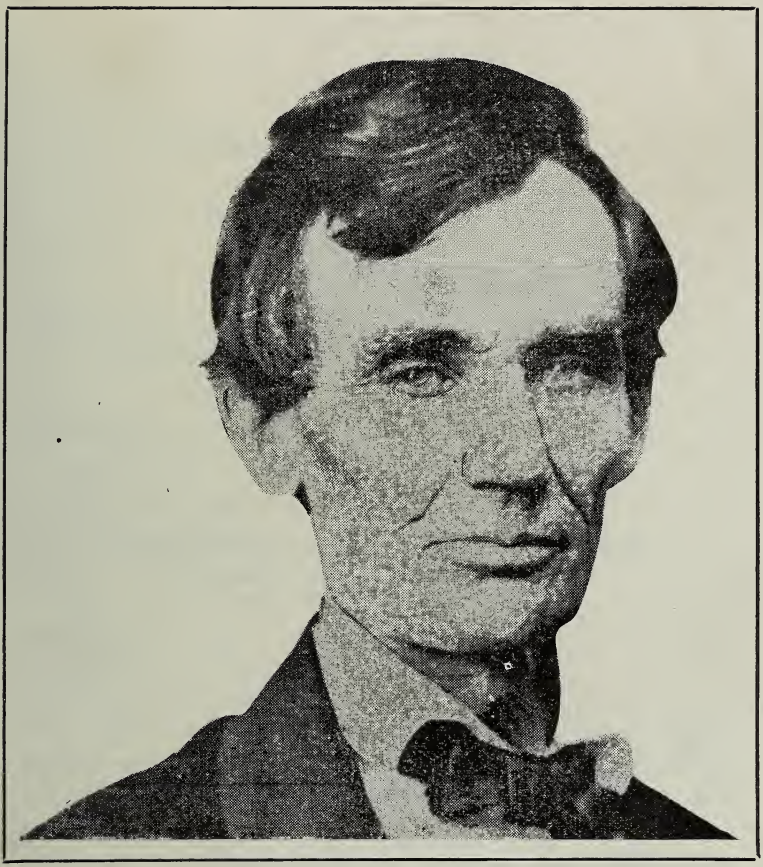
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Lincoln and the Communists

By EARL BROWDER

Speech delivered on Lincoln's birthday, Feb. 12, 1936, at Springfield, Ill., by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the U.S.A.

IN these days of national crisis, when our nation stands again at the cross-roads of history, there is especial value in again reviewing some of the lessons of that previous great crisis of these United States, out of which emerged the giant figure of Abraham Lincoln.

Again we are facing, as in 1860, the conflict between the forces of the people and the forces of entrenched privilege and political reaction. Again, this conflict goes to the roots of national life, this time even more fundamentally than before. Again, the life-needs of the masses demand a fundamental revision of the economic, social and legal foundations of the nation, a revision which is being resisted most desperately by a coalition of all the most reactionary forces of the country without regard to previous party affiliations. Again, we have a crisis of parties, and a crisis of the Constitution. And again, the party of reaction finds its chief rallying center in the Supreme Court of the United States.

History has marked the beginnings of the crisis of Lincoln's period with the date of the Supreme Court decision on the Dred Scott case of infamous memory. Future historians, following this tradition, will date the present period of political crisis from the Supreme Court decisions invalidating the

National Recovery Act and the Agricultural Adjustment Act. In the Dred Scott decision, the Supreme Court declared that Congress had no power to prohibit Negro slavery in the territories of the United States. Today, the same arrogant tones, used by Justice Taney in 1857, resound again in the halls of the Supreme Court in its declaration that Congress has no power to enact social legislation to relieve the distressed masses of the population. The Dred Scott decision, whereby it was attempted to make the Supreme Court the final arbiter of the destinies of the American people, led directly to four years' civil war. Popular sovereignty triumphed, but only at enormous cost. Today, the Supreme Court has again raised the same issue, in terms of the problems and class relations of 1936.

Facing again this usurpation of power by the Supreme Court, let us recall the words of Abraham Lincoln in his first inaugural address:

> "If the policy of the government, upon vital questions affecting the whole people, is to be irrevocably fixed by decisions of the Supreme Court, the instant they are made, the people will have ceased to be their own rulers, having to that extent practically resigned their government into the hands of that tribunal."

How fully do the words of Lincoln describe the situation today! And what a contrast these words with the timorous evasions, with the cowardly equivocations of our present pigmies who aspire to the role of the giant Lincoln.

Lincoln was not content to point out the issues. He also with equal clarity gave the answer. He said:

> "Somebody has to reverse that decision, since it is made, and we mean to reverse it, and we mean to do it peaceably."

That decision was reversed. The Supreme Court did not have the last word. Lincoln's desire to find a peaceful solu-

tion was blocked by the forces of reaction who resorted to arms as the party of reaction has always done since the dawn of history. But when Lincoln found that a peaceful solution was impossible, he did not therefore abandon the solution. The course which he finally took under the compulsion of history had already been anticipated by another of our historical giants, with more far-seeing eyes—the immortal John Brown, and the Abolitionists.

The period of the Civil War, like all similar periods of crisis, was marked by the break-up of the traditional party system and the emergence of a new party to lead the country through the crisis. It is one of the ironies of history that the Republican Party, created by Lincoln, has now become the chief party of reaction; that the party which began in a life-and-death struggle against the Supreme Court and the political reaction which it headed, now prepares its disappearance from the political scene as the champion of that Supreme Court on a similar issue. The reactionary Republican Party of today still attempts to exploit the name of Lincoln, but trembles with fear before the words of Lincoln applied to the present crisis which they would prefer to consign to the dusty shelves of libraries and archives.

If the tradition of Lincoln is to survive, if his words shall play a role in political life today, this will be due not to the Republicans nor to the Democrats, but to the modern representatives of historical progress, the *Communists*. Today, it is left to the Communist Party to revive the words of Lincoln. All others are content merely with a conventional and empty bowing before a great tradition. In this also, we are repeating the experience of the Civil War days. At that time, the party of reaction was the Democratic Party, that appealed to the traditions of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. But it was not the Democratic Party which used the teachings of Jefferson and Jackson, but it was Lincoln and the new party.

Lincoln revived all the best traditions of the giants of American democracy. He quoted the fierce attacks against the Supreme Court usurpation of power that had been so forcefully voiced in a previous period by Jefferson, Jackson, and other founders of the Democracy.

Lincoln carried the fight against reaction to the American masses. He roused them and mobilized them for an offensive in behalf of the struggle against tyranny, for liberty and democracy. In this cause, he called upon the traditions of 1776, as we Communists do today. Attacking the Dred Scott decision and the usurped power of the Supreme Court, Lincoln, speaking here in Springfield, brought forward the Declaration of Independence, which he described as:

> "A stumbling block to all those who, in after times, might seek to turn a free people back into the hateful path of despotism."

The forces of reaction today, the Liberty League, Republican Party, the unspeakable Hearsts and Talmadges, make a great outcry about "Americanism" and the "Constitution". They seek to turn both into the instruments of reaction, but neither Americanism nor the Constitution belongs to them. Even the Constitution, which was framed to limit and check the free play of democratic forces, and which was adopted only after the Bill of Rights had been attached, by no means laid the foundation for the kind of irresponsible despotism which the party of reaction seeks to establish today. Nowhere does the Constitution grant powers to the Supreme Court over Congress, but it does make Congress the potential master of the Supreme Court whenever it chooses to exercise that power. Only Congress determines the size of the Supreme Court and, togther with the President, its composition. There have been many changes in the past, made necessary by political considerations. There is nothing in the Constitution to prevent

even more changes in the future. It is worth recalling that in the midst of Lincoln's administration, on March 3, 1863, a Supreme Court of five members, which was hampering the conduct of the war against the slave power, was changed into a Supreme Court of ten members, which followed an opposite policy. On July 23, 1866, there was another change, reducing the number of members from ten to seven. On April 10, 1869, the number was again enlarged from seven to nine. What has been done in the past, can be done again. It is not necessary to amend the Constitution in order to do it. It is only necessary to have a Congress of real representatives of the masses of people, prepared to assert the popular power.

Lincoln would perhaps not have understood the problems of today. He played his role before the rise of monopoly capital on the one side and the modern labor movement on the other. But even of the problems of today, he had a great prophetic glimpse. His experiences with the vulture flock of Northern profiteers who coined the blood of Union soldiers into vast fortunes (the elder J. P. Morgan founded the family fortune by selling the government its own condemned rifles at fantastic prices) brought him forebodings about a future crisis when the power of the monied aristocracy would have to be broken. He foresaw the sharpening of the struggle between labor and capital and in this coming new alignment of the nation into two camps, he clearly took his stand upon the side of labor. In his message to Congress on December 3, 1861, he spoke words for which we have no modern parallel in presidential messages. He said:

> "Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration."

Before the war, Lincoln was attacked by Northern reac-

tionaries who wanted him to suppress strikes of working men that were taking place. Lincoln answered:

> "Thank God that we have a system of labor where there can be a strike."

Lincoln pointed out, as a central issue of the Civil War, that only the liberation of the Negroes could provide any basis for substantial freedom for white labor. He did not hesitate to confiscate the slave-owners property, and to arm the freed slaves to fight for the security of their freedom. He said that if the slave power should win out, then

> "Instead of white laborers who can strike, you'll soon have black laborers who can't strike."

Lincoln did not always push forward the struggle for his cause with full vigor. He was often the victim of doubts and hesitations which arose from his unstable class support and which he ascribed to his abhorrence of war and his love of peace. He learned the bitter lesson that his vacillations only served to encourage the reaction and prolong the agony of the struggle. These weaknesses of Lincoln were quite different, however, from the miserable evasions, the cowardly crawlings of our modern statesmen before the powers of reaction. He never altered his course or compromised his final aims. Karl Marx, the founder of communism, the great genius of scientific socialism, saw this clearly and claimed Loncoln as

> "The single-minded son of the working class."

Marx, with an insight typical of his great genius, analyzed the relation between Lincoln's historical role and his weaknesses in the following words:

> "The fury with which the Southerns have received Lincoln's Acts, proves their importance. All Lincoln's Acts appear like the mean pettifogging conditions which one lawyer puts to his

opposing lawyer. But this does not alter their historic content."

It was Marx who caused the Council of the First International Workingmen's Association to address to Lincoln on November 29, 1864 a letter of congratulations upon his re-election, a document which takes its place among the most important in the history of the international working class movement. Marx strongly influenced the British workers whose mass protests kept Prime Minister Palmerston from going into the war on the side of the slave-owners, a remarkable demonstration of international working class solidarity.

Karl Marx always understood the tremendous world importance of the United States. How deeply he valued the revolution of 1776 and the contributions of Lincoln for the whole world liberation movement, he summarized in typical fashion in one brief sentence. Marx wrote:

> "As in the eighteenth century the American War of Independence sounded the tocsin for the European middle class, so in the nineteenth century the American Civil War sounded it for the European working class."

Another great leader of the international working class, Lenin, reminded us American workers of our great revolutionary traditions and their significance for problems of today, when in his *Letter to the American Workers,* he emphasized

> "The great, world historic, progressive and revolutionary significance of the American Civil War of 1861-1865!"

This understanding of Lincoln and his role by the revolutionary workers of his time and since down to the present, was not all one-sided. Lincoln responded to the letters of encouragement and support sent to him by the First International and by the British workers' organizations. He praised the heroism of the British workers' movement which supported

the North at the price of suffering and starvation, a heroism which, he declared,

> "Has not been surpassed in any age or in any country."

He showed his understanding of the importance of the International Workingmen's Association when he declared:

> "The strongest bond of human sympathy, outside of the family relation, should be one uniting all working people, of all nations and tongues, and kindreds."

Lincoln was not a stuffed shirt. He entered into the struggle of his day with forthright speech and energetic action. When he was faced with the usurped power of the Supreme Court, he did not content himself with an equivocal offhand phrase about "horse and buggy" interpretation of the Constitution. In homely and direct language, subject to no misinterpretation, understandable by the broad masses, he denounced the Court. Here, for example, is one of his declarations that rang through the whole country:

> "The Supreme Court has got the doctrine of popular sovereignty down as thin as homeopathic soup that was made by boiling the shadow of a pigeon that had starved to death."

When Lincoln quoted his great predecessors, he searched for similar fighting declarations. One of his favorite quotations from Jefferson regarding the Supreme Court was:

> "You seem to consider the judges the ultimate arbiters of all constitutional questions—a very dangerous doctrine indeed, and one which would place us under the despotism of an oligarchy."

It is because Lincoln was a fighter, a man of principle, one who never compromised the central issues of his cause once the struggle was well begun, that he carried our nation through a great crisis and opened up a new period of progress.

He did not allow the forces of reaction to advance and conquer new positions while he was in office. His second campaign for the presidency was waged on issues and slogans representing an advance, not a retreat, as compared with his first campaign. Thus it was possible for the letter of the First International, written by Marx to Lincoln, to describe the difference between his two campaigns by saying:

> "If resistance to the slave power was the watchword of your first election, the triumphant war-cry of your re-election is 'death to slavery!' "

Is it necessary to draw any comparison between the record of this great historical figure and that of the man who today is in these days opening his second campaign for the presidency? Is it necessary to point our the contrast between that bold solution of problems by Lincoln and our present retreat, confusion, bankruptcy and hopelessness which is but very thinly covered up with high-sounding phrases and a professional smile? Under Lincoln, reaction was beaten, not strengthened; under Roosevelt the reaction has waxed fat on huge profits and became more arrogant than ever. Under Lincoln the Negroes were freed from slavery; under Roosevelt they are suffering a thousand Scottsboro and Herndon cases. Under Lincoln, the Supreme Court was tamed; under Roosevelt all effective power has been surrendered to that reactionary body.

In 1936, as in 1857, the fight against the Supreme Court is more than a fight against an unjust decision. It is a fight against a program which seeks to enslave the American people, a program which hides its reactionary face behind the mask of the Constitution and the legal spieling of the greybeards in the Supreme Court who juggle constitutional clauses to suit the vested interests of Wall Street.

Lincoln became great because he stood at the head of and

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represented the forces of the people, the forces of progress, which smashed through the old barriers of a corrupted and degenerate party system upholding an antiquated economic system with the establishment of a new party, with a new program, which boldly broke with the past, launched out into the future, and opened up the development of new and higher productive forces.

The times call again for a Lincoln, for a new party, for a new program. Only this can defeat the reactionaries who are trying to turn us back into the "hateful paths of despotism", who defend the capitalistic destruction of wealth, who keep our great factories idle and 12,000,000 workers unemployed.

You miners and other workers of Illinois, you have heard your leaders proclaim Roosevelt as "the great humanitarian", as the man who will lead you in the struggle against the brutal reaction of the Republican-Liberty League-Hearst combination. But can you seriously believe that this is the answer to your problems? Can you believe that the Democratic Party which rules you now in Illinois, which calls out the troops against you when you strike, which works hand in hand with the coal operators who shoot you down on the picket lines—that this party, shot through and through with capitalistic corruption, whose main base is the reactionary Solid South, whose leader leads by running away before every issue of the day, can meet the present crisis in any way comparable to that of Lincoln in 1860-65? The very placing of the comparison provides its own answer. The very thought becomes a slur on the memory of Lincoln.

No, what is needed is a new party and a new leadership. We Communists know that our party, the Communist Party, with its fundamental program for a complete reconstruction of society on the basis of socialism, provides the only final answer to our problems. But even now, at once, we can already in 1936, bring together broad millions who, though

not ready for socialism, want to defeat the forces of reaction. We know that growing millions are ready to come together, on the basis of an immediate program of uncompromising struggle against the reaction, to overthrow the usurped power of the Supreme Court, to enact comprehensive social legislation, to provide the immediate needs of the workers, farmers and city middle classes, to provide old-age, unemployment and social insurance, to guarantee civil liberties, to secure equality for the Negroes, to place the people in charge of their government, to oust the bankers, corporation lawyers and their gang, to secure the possibility for the masses of the people to freely examine and debate their problems, to freely choose, if such shall be their future decision, the road to socialism in America.

Such a party and such a program is what we have in mind when we propose the coming together of the trade unions, the unemployed organizations, the farmers' organizations, the Townsend clubs, the minority parties, such as Socialist and Communist, into a broad, all-inclusive, *Farmer-Labor Party.*

Only such a party can carry forward today, on the broadest possible scale and effectively, the traditions of Lincoln. The reactionaries will rise up in rage against us, they will denounce us as Reds, and revolutionists. Of this, we need not be afraid. Revolution is the essence of the American tradition. Revolution is the essence of the teachings of Lincoln. It was in reply to the Red-baiters of his own day that Lincoln gave this classical answer:

> "Any people anywhere being inclined and having the power have the right to rise and shake off the existing government, and form a new one that suits them better. This is a most valuable, a most sacred right—a right which we hope and believe is to liberate the world. Nor is this right confined to cases in which the whole people of an existing government may choose to exercise it. Any portion of such people that can may revolutionize, and make their own of so much of the

territory as they inhabit. More than this, a majority of any portion of such people may revolutionize, putting down a minority, intermingled with or near about them, who may oppose this movement. Such minority was precisely the case of the Tories of our own revolution. It is a quality of revolution not to go by old lines or old laws, but to break up both and make up new ones."

Lincoln was the object, in his day, of a torrent of abuse and vilification of exactly the same sort as today is poured out by Hearst, the Liberty League and the Republicans against all progressive forces in the country from liberals to Communists. Lincoln did not retreat. He faced them calmly and boldly and declared in defiance of all the vested interests of his time:

"This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it."

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